

Mark 9:38-50

38 'Teacher,' said John, 'we saw someone driving out demons in your name and we told him to stop, because he was not one of us.'

39 'Do not stop him,' Jesus said. 'For no one who does a miracle in my name can in the next moment say anything bad about me,

40 for whoever is not against us is for us.

41 Truly I tell you, anyone who gives you a cup of water in my name because you belong to the Messiah will certainly not lose their reward.

42 'If anyone causes one of these little ones – those who believe in me – to stumble, it would be better for them if a large millstone were hung round their neck and they were thrown into the sea.

43 If your hand causes you to stumble, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life maimed than with two hands to go into hell, where the fire never goes out.

45 And if your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life crippled than to have two feet and be thrown into hell.

47 And if your eye causes you to stumble, pluck it out. It is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than to have two eyes and be thrown into hell,

48 where "the worms that eat them do not die, and the fire is not quenched."

49 Everyone will be salted with fire.

50 'Salt is good, but if it loses its saltiness, how can you make it salty again? Have salt among yourselves, and be at peace with each other.'

Salted with fire

Mark 9:38-50

This is a confusing passage so I'll try to explain 3 things about it fairly briefly. I've called this salted with fire because I like the phrase in verse 49, although despite having done 3 years theological training even I was struggling to understand it!

Firstly, if you read the 5 verses before this, Jesus has taken a little child in his arms to illustrate a point, [and so it's very relevant to today because Annette will be do exactly that in a few minutes time, but] it [also] explains verse 42: *'[he's still holding the child] If anyone causes one of these little ones to stumble, it would be better for them if a large millstone were hung round their neck and they were thrown into the sea.'*

So if we think the church should never have sanctioned any sort of abuse of children we will be encouraged that Jesus himself reserves one of his very few harsh judgements for those who harm children. But we can't reject God on the basis of what bad people do.

Unfortunately they do turn up in church as well. Also remember that Jesus is very fond of exaggerating to make a point. He's not actually advocating drowning people. If you read the next 2 verses about chopping your hand or foot off that might become obvious! It's interesting though that he includes the eye. How often do we say about some film or other 'I wish I'd never watched that'? He doesn't condemn. His answer is just don't watch. We do know our own weaknesses. Whatever holds us back must be cut out.

As a slight aside here 'Hell' is translated from the Aramaic word 'gehenna'. This was the name of a valley near Jerusalem which for Jews over many centuries was symbolically a place of fire where the wicked would be sent to atone for their sins, but only for a year. The image of eternal hell in our culture is actually a medieval invention, not a christian idea at all. Gehenna is understood to be the opposite of the eternal joy and freedom of God's kingdom.

Secondly we have this conversation *38 John said, 'we saw someone driving out demons in your name and we told him to stop, because he wasn't one of us.'* *39 'Don't stop him,' Jesus said. 'No one who does a miracle in my name can in the next second say something bad about me,* *40 because whoever is not against us is for us.*

In other places Jesus says the opposite of this, *whoever is not with me is against me.* Strangely these aren't contradictory. The first refers to the friendly exorcist here who was at least healing people, and in Jesus name, although maybe he didn't fully know what that meant, yet. Jesus was OK with it because he clearly never intended to strictly regulate his followers, as long as they believed in him. The other time when he said - *whoever is not with me is against me* - he was being accused by the Pharisees that he was the one who was evil. The religious Jews were convinced they were right but they did serious damage with their obsessive religious observance. Jesus was not religious. He made no sense to people who were narrow thinking and certain about everything.

He set people free from their hang ups and He still does.

His intention was for everyone to make *him* their role model because that way, surprisingly maybe, you really can be free. Try it. Too often the church has done quite the opposite.

3rd & Finally, salted with fire. Fire refers back to the previous verses, to the fire that never goes out in gehenna, but a fire which to christians symbolises not destruction but the Holy Spirit who burns away the bad stuff. Fire symbolises God's presence in the OT too, the burning bush. Salted refers to the next verse, 50: *'Salt is good, but if it loses its saltiness, how can you make it salty again? Have salt among yourselves, and be at peace with each other.'*

Salt has many properties. It brings out flavour but never on its own, always together with other ingredients. It can be a preservative and keep everything fresh. And it can also be used as a fertiliser, because in manured soil it helps growth, but it also kills slugs. Always a bonus. Salt has an important meaning here, that we shouldn't be able to help being salt in our community. We should be influencers in the best way possible.

So we *should have* the flavour of Jesus and only bring good things to our community. *We should be* salt of the earth encouraging growth and preserving what's already worthwhile. Bringing, not division and conflict, but peace and unity. And we *must have* the fire of the Holy Spirit because without him we can't have love, and can't become whole integrated people. Who wouldn't want that? Despite our failings as human beings, as Jesus says, everyone who follows him will be salted with fire, will grow to be like him. Amen.